

In the Claims:

Please amend the claims in accordance with the following listing of claims:

1. (currently amended) A bushing member, comprising:

an elastomeric member defining a central opening between a front face and a rear face, said front face and rear face being perpendicular to the axis of the central opening;

a slot in said bushing along a first side of said elastomeric member providing a lateral access from an exterior of said elastomer member to said central opening;

a continuous hinge means for configured as part of said elastomeric member, ~~reducing an opening force of said elastomeric member and for easing said lateral access to said central opening;~~ at least a part of said continuous hinge means for reducing positioned proximate a second side of said elastomeric member distal said slot, whereby during an opening of said bushing member said continuous hinge means reduces an opening force required for separating said slot and inserting an external member into said central opening and improves a smooth transfer of said external member into said slot; and

at least a first and a second flange member extending outwardly and generally perpendicular to the axis of the central opening from an outer edge portion of said elastomeric member proximate respective said front face and said rear face, thereby ~~providing~~ forming a saddle portion of said elastomeric member therebetween which extends substantially the entire length of the elastomeric member.

2. (previously presented) A bushing member, according to claim 1, further comprising:

an outer seal member on each respective said front and rear face; and

each said outer seal member bounding said central opening and joining respective sides of said slot to provide a seal with said external member, whereby when said external member is assembled with said bushing member each said outer seal member provides a sealing contact with said external

member and minimizes a debris entry to said central opening.

3. (canceled)

4. (currently amended) A bushing member, according to claim 2, wherein:

said first and said second flange members define respective hinge portions proximate said second side wherein a thickness of respective said flange members is reduced;

said continuous hinge ~~means for reducing~~ includes said respective hinge portions; and

said hinge portions minimizing said opening force of said elastomeric member and easing said lateral access to said central opening during an insertion of said external member, whereby an opening stress on said bushing member is minimized and a risk of damaging said bushing member is reduced.

5. (currently amended) A bushing member, comprising:

an elastomeric member defining a central opening between a front face and a rear face said front face and rear face being perpendicular to the axis of the central opening;

a slot in said bushing along a first side of said elastomeric member providing a lateral access from an exterior of said elastomer member to said central opening;

~~a continuous hinge means for reducing an opening force of said elastomeric member and means for easing said lateral access to said central opening;~~ configured as part of said elastomeric member, at least a part of said continuous hinge ~~means for reducing~~ being positioned proximate a second side of said elastomeric member distal said slot, whereby during an opening of said bushing member said continuous hinge ~~means~~ reduces an opening force required for separating said slot and inserting an external member into said central opening;

an outer seal member on each respective said front and rear faces;

each said outer seal member bounding said central opening and joining respective sides of said

slot to provide a seal with said external member, whereby when said external member is assembled with said bushing member each said outer seal member provides a sealing contact with said external member and minimizes a debris entry to said central opening; and

at least a first and a second flange member extending outwardly and generally perpendicular to the axis of the central opening from an outer edge portion of said elastomeric member proximate respective said front face and said rear face and respective said outer seal members.

6. (canceled)

7. (currently amended) A bushing member, according to claim 5, wherein:

said first and said second flange members defining respective hinge portions proximate said second side wherein a thickness of respective said flange members is reduced;

said continuous hinge ~~means for reducing~~ including said respective hinge portions; and

said hinge portions minimizing said opening force of said elastomeric member and easing said lateral access to said central opening during an insertion of said external member, whereby an opening stress on said bushing member is minimized and a risk of damaging said bushing member is reduced.

8. (currently amended) A bushing member, comprising:

an elastomeric member defining a central opening between a front face and a rear face, said front face and rear face being perpendicular to the axis of the central opening;

a slot in said bushing along a first side of said elastomeric member providing a lateral access to said central opening;

~~a continuous hinge means for reducing an opening force of said elastomeric member and easing said lateral access to said central opening;~~ configured as part of said elastomeric member, at least a part of said continuous hinge ~~means~~ positioned proximate a second side of said elastomeric

member distal said slot,

an outer seal member on each respective said front and rear face; and

at least a first and a second flange member extending outwardly and generally perpendicular to the axis of the central opening from an outer edge portion of said elastomeric member proximate respective said front face and said rear face.

9. (currently amended) A bushing member, according to claim 8, wherein:

said first and said second flange members defining respective hinge portions proximate said second side wherein a thickness of respective said flange members is reduced;

said continuous hinge ~~means for reducing~~ including said respective hinge portions; and

said hinge portions minimizing said opening force of said elastomeric member and easing said lateral access to said central opening during an insertion of said external member, whereby an opening stress on said bushing member is minimized and a risk of damaging said bushing member is reduced.

10. (currently amended) A bracket assembly, comprising:

an elastomeric member defining a central opening between a front face and a rear face, said front face and rear face being perpendicular to the axis of the central opening;

a slot in along a first side of said elastomeric member providing a lateral access to said central opening;

a continuous hinge ~~means for reducing an opening force of said elastomeric member and for easing said lateral access to said central opening~~;

configured as part of said elastomeric member, at least a part of said continuous hinge ~~means for reducing~~ proximate a second side of said elastomeric member distal said slot, whereby during an opening of said bushing member said continuous hinge ~~means~~ reduces an opening force required for separating respective sides of said slot and inserting an external member into said central opening;

a rigid bracket member bounding a portion of said elastomeric member, whereby when assembled said bracket member is shaped to slide over a saddle portion of said elastomeric member; and

at least a first and a second flange member extending outwardly and generally perpendicular to the axis of the central opening from an outer edge portion of said elastomeric member proximate respective said front face and said rear face, whereby said saddle portion is formed between said respective spaced apart first and second flange members.

11. (canceled)

12. (currently amended) A bracket assembly, according to claim 10, wherein:

said first and said second flange members define respective hinge portions proximate said second side wherein a thickness of respective said flange members is reduced;

said continuous hinge ~~means for reducing~~ including said respective hinge portions; and

said hinge portions minimizing said opening force of said elastomeric member and easing said lateral access to said central opening during an insertion of said external member, whereby an opening stress on said bushing member is minimized and a risk of damaging said bushing member is reduced.

13. (previously presented) A bracket assembly, according to claim 10, further comprising:

an outer seal member on each said respective front face and said rear face; and

each said outer seal member bounding said central opening and joining respective sides of said slot to provide a seal with said external member, whereby when said external member is assembled with said bushing member each said outer seal member provides a sealing contact with said external member and minimizes a debris entry to said central opening.

14. (previously presented) A bracket assembly, according to claim 12, further comprising:  
means for positioning and stiffening said rigid bracket member;  
a first and a second edge member in said means for positioning; and  
said first and second edge members extending away from an outer portion of said rigid bracket member, whereby said edge members provide at least a guiding alignment to said elastomeric member during an assembly.

15. (previously presented) A bracket assembly, according to claim 14, wherein:  
each said edge member includes a compression portion extending proximate said first and second flange members, whereby during an assembly of said bracket and said elastomeric member said compression portions contact respective said first and second flange members and provide an urging compression force proximate said respective front and rear faces thereby improving a sealing force about said external member.

16. (previously presented) A bracket assembly, according to claim 15, wherein:  
each said edge member further includes a strengthening portion extending along opposing wing sections laterally extending from sides of said bracket member; and  
said strengthening portions increasing a rigidity of said bracket member and minimizing an unintended deformation of said wing sections during said assembly.

17. (currently amended) A bushing assembly kit, comprising:  
an elastomeric member defining a central opening between a front face and a rear face, said front face and rear face being perpendicular to the axis of the central opening;  
a slot in along a first side of said elastomeric member providing a lateral access to said central opening;  
a continuous hinge ~~means for reducing an opening force of said elastomeric member and for~~

~~easing said lateral access to said central opening during an insertion of an external member into said central opening; configured as part of said elastomeric member, at least a part of said continuous hinge means for reducing~~ proximate a second side of said elastomeric member distal said slot,

at least a first and a second flange member extending outwardly and generally perpendicular to the axis of the central opening from an outer edge portion of said elastomeric member proximate respective said front face and said rear face and defining a saddle region there between which extends substantially the entire length of the elastomeric member;

an outer seal member on each said respective front face and said rear face; and

a rigid bracket member bounding a portion of said elastomeric member and covering said saddle region between said first and second flange members and providing a compressive force to said elastomeric member during an assembly, whereby said compressive force urges said slot into a sealed position and provides a sealing force to said outer seal members and said first and second flange members, whereby said bushing assembly enables a tight seal between said elastomeric member and said external member.

18. (previously presented) A bushing assembly kit, according to claim 17, further comprising:

means for positioning and stiffening said rigid bracket member;

a first and a second edge member in said means for positioning; and

said first and second edge members extending away from an outer portion of said rigid bracket member proximate said saddle region, whereby said edge members provide at least a guiding alignment to said elastomeric member during an assembly.

19. (currently amended) A method of assembling a sway bar bushing assembly, comprising the steps of:

selecting an elastomeric member;

said elastomeric member defining a central opening between a front face and a rear

face, said front face and rear face being perpendicular to the axis of the central opening, and further comprising:

a slot in said bushing along a first side of said elastomeric member providing a lateral access to said central opening;

~~a continuous hinge means for reducing an opening force of said elastomeric member and easing said lateral access to said central opening; configured as part of said elastomeric member~~, at least a part of said continuous hinge means for reducing proximate a second side of said elastomeric member distal said slot, whereby during an opening of said bushing member said hinge means reduces an opening force required for separating said slot and inserting an external member into said central opening;

at least a first and a second flange member extending outwardly and generally perpendicular to the axis of the central opening from an outer edge portion of said elastomeric member proximate respective said front face and said rear face;

applying an opening force to said bushing member to open said slot and laterally inserting said external member into said central opening;

selecting a bracket member and placing said bracket member over said elastomeric member;  
and

securing said bracket member and said elastomeric member to an external frame member.

20. (previously presented) A method for assembling a sway bar bushing assembly, according to claim 19, wherein:

said step of securing further comprises a step of:

compressing said elastomeric member sufficiently to press closed said slot and provide a leak resistant seal along at least said slot thereby minimizing moisture access to said external member.